What Ever Happened to Authority
Mark 1:14-22
January 26, 1969

It seems that we are spending more and more time recently reminiscing about the "good old days". And the topic of these nostalgic reminiscences seems always to have something to do with authority. As we look back - even to the recent past - we recall a feeling of safety, security and stability. Authority was respected. Children obeyed their parents; students obeyed their teachers; the people respected the police and the courts; the world respected America; and everybody respected the church.

Of course, there is a certain favorable distortion that takes place whenever we engage in this kind of reminiscence. Things were never quite that simple. And yet there can be no denying that we are, today, in a new situation, and that authority is, in fact, under siege from several quarters. Now before we look more deeply let me hasten to add that this siege of authority may not be nearly so ominous as it appears. The radical right would have us equate the questioning of authority with the death throes of the Republic. I would merely suggest at this point that quite the reverse may be true; that it is a healthy, albeit painful, exercise for authority to be questioned with the result that true authority is finally established and false authority unceremoniously thrown to the wind.

In any case, this is where we are. At no time in our history has constituted civil authority in the form of government, law enforcement agencies and the judicial structure been less sure of itself, less effective, or commanded less respect. In the cities, on the campuses, authority has yet to be established notwithstanding modern weaponry, National Guard invasions, police dogs and the strong talk of Governor Reagan. It just hasn't worked. In fact, it appears that efforts in this direction serve only to increase the ever-widening gap between those who exercise authority and those who question the right to its legitimate exercise.

Parents, since the days of Socrates, have bemoaned the disrespect of children toward authority. In this sense the generation gap is rather old-hat. And yet, here too, we are dealing with something new. This is different. The old gap has noticeably widened. And, in fact, parental authority is not what it used to be.

Probably the most significant illustration of the authority crisis in which we find ourselves, however, has to do with the church. For a thousand years the Roman Catholic Church has been synonomous with authority. The Church had and exercised a commonly accepted authority over the lives, beliefs and behavior of its members. In relationship to the world about it, the church claimed for itself a certain divinely ordained authority to act, to influence and to wield power. That, too, has passed. The liberal Protestant journal "The Christian Century" several months ago was strongly critical of Pope Paul's encyclical on birth control, taking it to task for its lack of realism and its failure to speak to the needs of people and at the same time the most important single problem facing the whole world. But in the very next issue, "The Century" called attention to the fact that thereally significant thing about the Encyclical was that priests were openly criticizing it, and Roman Catholics were openly and consciously ignoring it. That is to say, ecclesiastical authority simply isn't what it used to be. And the Christian Century was quick to see that all churchly authority is at the same impasse. That is, it's crumbling fast. What there was of the old authority, is no more, and some

new basis, some new reconstruction of a base for authority must be devised, or we are all in serious trouble.

I believe part of the problem is an inherent suspicion of all authority that is simply built-in to the American mentality. It has stood us in good stead in days past. It was born in a revolution, expressed in a system of checks and balances, and nurtured in the evolution of Republican Democracy. But it has its less noble expressions as well. A great American pastime has always been stealing from the Government. Political slander and character assassination have been table talk in millions of homes. And long before the hippies were calling the police "fascist pigs", millions of Americans were deriding and disdaining them in the presence of their children. How far is it between the obscene gesture of the radical student and the quiet disdain of his very respectable father? After all, our respect for the police generally is mirrored in the fact that a man can earn more money doing almost anything else.

All things considered, then, I think it very clear that we are in the midst of an authority crisis of the first magnitude. Carl Sanburgs' words about the Civil War era apply with equal precision today: "Something is dying and something is being born." Where it will lead, culturally and politically, is anyon's guess. But one thing is certain. You and I and everone else who is alive and functioning in 1969 will inevitably influence the final course. By what we do -- or don't do - new forms of authority will emerge to give structure and statulity to our common life. As Christians this places a special responsibility on us -- mainly because this whole matter of authority is very closely related to our faith.

Individual authority is an extremely slippery concept. A man with a gun has authority. As long as he has the gun and no one else does, he can make things happen the way he wants them to happen. That is authority based on coercion - and it's easy enough to understand. But thereare those without guns who have authority - and here difinitions become difficult. Some men have it - others do not, and it"s not always easy to understand why. In fact a man have authority for me - and leave you cold, and here we get into the nebulous area of personal response to other people. For instance, there are political figures who, for some of you, have authority. While for others of you these same politicians have absolutely no personal authority at all.

Jesus of Nazareth was one man, who for some people had authority. In fact, from the very beginning this one was one of the more remarkable things about him: he had authority. In the first chapter of the Gospel according to Mark, immediately after he had enlisted Andrew and Simon, James and John, he went to the synagogue at Capernium and began to teach. Mark reports that the people there were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes. The same comment is found in Luke, following his teaching in the Nazareth Synagogue: and in Matthew, at the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount. Whatever individual authority is, Jesus had it.

It's very significant that in each case the authority of Jesus is contrasted with a lack of authority on the part of the scribes. "The people were astonished because he taught with authority, not like the scribes." That's significant because if anyone had authority in the culture of first century Judea, it should have been the scribes. They were the interpreters of the religious law: scholarly men, their task was to apply the ancient, Mosaic legal code to the daily situations of life. They had going for them the law itself and the entire tradition of the people of Israel. When they spoke, people should have listened. So it is quite significant that it is these men with whom the

authority of Jesus was contrasted.

Of course we read back into the New Testament our own beliefs and feelings about Jesus. To see - twenty centuries later - He is the divine Son of God. For us that is the base of his authority: He is Lord of all: He had all the truth of God on His side. But His first century listeners certainly didn't know that or belitve it. To them he was just an itinerant teacher from the city of Nazareth.

To understand the full significance of this remarkable contrast, then, we must note that he had no religious credentials: the scribes did. He had no ecclesiastical status: the scribes did. He had no power of influence with the establishment: the scribes did. And yet he had authority; and the scribes did not.

Why?

Jesus spoke from experience: that's why. The scribes based their teaching and judgements on tradition. Jesus spoke out of the context of life itself. When He taught He told stories people could understand; situations in which his listeners had been involved. He posed questions they had asked and gave answers that were realistic. That is to say Jesus, was relevant: His teachings met people where they were because they were coming from one who knew what life was like for the common man. Jesus had this authority. But there was more.

It was an authority of love: deep, compassionate, personal concern for people. They knew his reputation. He had defied tradition by stooping to lift a prostitute from the gutter: He had compassion for the adultress, the leper, the tax collector, the riff raff. The scribes did not. Or if they did, their fellings were well desguised in the costume of respectable peity. So he had authority: when He talked about a man's social responsibility for his neighbor the people knew exactly what he meant because he was living it daily. To use the cliche, "he practiced what He preached" and so He had authority.

Finally, there was an authenticity about Him when He spoke. There was nothing pompous or presumptious here. People responded because this was a genuine man. George Arther Buttrick has put it well: "People listened to Jesus, and then said, That is what I have always known deep down, even though I have no words to say it" (I.B. P336, Vol. VII) That's a perceptive comment. Every so often it happens to me. Someone will put into words a feeling, an understanding, that is inside me, but which I've never been able to articulate. And when that happens, the person who makes it happen suddenly has authority for me.

There is more, of course, Jesus had that quality so much in the news at election time called charisma. He spoke - and a spark was kindled: people listened. You can't put it down - but some men have it, and others do not. But mainly His authority was based on his life experience, His love and His honest authenticity. And it was for this that people were astonished.

Now, it seems to me that this little exercise ought to be helping us with our own concerns about authority. It seems to me that we ought to learn here that parental authority based on either coercion or tradition isn't going to be very effective. To put it even more bluntly, if we expect children to respect our authority 1)because we will punish them if they don't, or 2)because we are parents and children ought to obey parents - are in for a rude awakening. It doesn't work - at least for long.

And yet that is an extremely difficult lesson to learn. We wish it were the other way. It would be so much simpler if our homes could operate on the same basis as Marine "Boot Camp". But the homes in which I've observed real authority - effective authority - are the homes in which love is so genuine anyone can feel it; when parents honestly attempt to participate in the thought -worlds of their children: where judicial decisions are not handed down ceremoniously, but gently, in love, and out of a mutual participation in

the complexities of life.

That's a hard lesson to learn: but it is even more difficult in the area of public authority. I have the notion that civil authority is respected when it is authentically responsive to the needs of people. That is to say -- if the police in the ghetto have the image of an oppressive, occupying army -- which in fact they have -- it is absurd to assume that their authority will be respected simply because they have a badge on. It doesn't work. The people didn't respect the scribes because of their office remember. Fortunatly there are more and more public adminstrators who are learning this conspicuous but difficult lesson. The Police Department's that do their job most effectively are not those with the heaviest weaponry but those enlightened departments with a good public relations and community action program. The cities where civil authority is respected are those in which the Mayors have walked the streets of the ghetto and honestly attempte to speak and listen -- instead of grandly legislating from City Hall. The Campuses that are peaceful are those on which authority is based on the administration's conspicuous concern for the identity of its students, where adminstrations have come out from behind their desks to talk with students and to take their concerns seriously.

Ecclesiastically, the same hard lesson must be learned. For centuries, the authority of the Church -- or religion generally -- has been based on coercion -- in the form of the fear of hell -- and tradition. Neither one goes very far today. People are neither afraid of hell, nor much impressed with ecclesiastical tradition. John Calvin may have had a point, but most people today could care less.

Chruch authority will be established when people see the Church loving people. It's that simple. Church authority and influence will be effective when the gap closes between what we say on the one hand, and what we do on the other. The Christian Faith will begin to speak with authority to the needs of the World, when the World observes the Church discarding any traditional status, any ecclesiastical pomposity and getting its hands dirty and bloody in the suffering of humanity.

How about us? Who has authority for us. If it is not Jesus Christ, perhaps something is missing. Perhaps we are not seeing or hearing clearly. He had authority, the Biblical writers note, and it was astonishing -- not logical, but surprising, remarkable.

Perhaps we suffer from over-exposure. Perhaps we've said the creed, and sung the hymns and prayed the prayer so often that it's all very old hat. Perhaps our persistant religiosity serves only to keep Jesus Christ at arms length, and this deprives him of any authority in our lives.

If this is so, and I expect it is, perhaps we need nothing so much as a new, uncluttered look at who he was and is: what He did and said. Forthis same Jesus who taught hemble men is the Lord of all creation. That is our faith. This same one whose compassion was so commonly conspicuous is the cosmic Lord of the whole universe. That is our faith. This same man who lived and died 2,000 years ago -- is risen and alive and working in our midst and in the world to reconcile and bind up and heal. That is our faith.

Stated matter -- of -- factly, that is astonishing. May this Lord, about whom we so casually affirm these things, become the authority in our lives.

Amen.